

## BACK OF THE HOUSE

# MIDDLE EAST FEAST

*Tanoreen.*

BY LAURA STANLEY

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

BAY RIDGE—Even on a gusty day, when powerful winds off the Verrazano Narrows scour the air clean, Tanoreen’s humble storefront announces itself with enveloping fragrance. You can smell it from across Third Avenue, a warming bouquet of toasted Near East spice, fresh-baked flatbread and roasting lamb. “Whenever I’m cooking,” says chef/owner Rawia Bishara, “it gives me the smell of home.”

After more than 30 years in Brooklyn—Rawia arrived as a bride, at age 19—“home” is still her mother’s kitchen in Nazareth, where she did not learn to cook. “Actually,” smiles the chef, “she never let any of us in there. She always said, ‘You’re going to have your own kitchen someday, and you’re going to be bored by how much you have to do. So be spoiled now, and let somebody else cook for you.’”

Fortunately for Bay Ridge, and for all her Brooklyn fans who routinely make the pilgrimage to her tiny dining room, Rawia is clearly not bored in her kitchen. You’ll find her here from 8 a.m. onward, six days a week, preparing the beloved dishes of her native land—an unstinting array of stews, casseroles, terrines, braises and roasts, and a profusion of mezze, the salads and finger foods which open the convivial Middle Eastern meal.

Rawia, an olive-skinned, full-figured beauty with a taste for heavy burnished jewelry and abundant kohl, cooks as confidently and extravagantly as she adorns herself. The contents of her spice box—ancient trade route flavors like cardamom, cumin, allspice, ginger, cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and rose-bud—are custom-roasted and ground for Tanoreen in Nazareth. Olives, pickles, yogurt, bread and pastry are cured, brined, fermented, and baked

in-house, in an endless cycle of hard labor she rarely regrets. “I get tired,” she says. “I already replaced one knee. But I’m not forced to do this. I really like it. I consider that a blessing.”

When you enter Tanoreen, leave your typical falafel-house experience at the door (without, remarkably, paying much more). Instead of the usual tabbouleh or baba ghanouj, start with smoked frekeh (green durum wheat kernels) tossed with pine nuts, slivered almond, and spiced chicken, a mhammara dip of roasted red





pepper, ground walnuts and pomegranate molasses, and a pizza-like version of the classic musakhan—sumac-reddened ground chicken on Arab taboon flatbread, topped with sweet caramelized onion. (If you want the sloppier traditional version, which you must eat with your hands, call ahead). Deep-fried sambossek—two-bite phyllo pies, stuffed with lamb or vegetables—are crisp and earthy; dainty stuffed grape leaves are deftly folded into logs the size of a petite woman’s thumb.

For lamb lovers, the entrée list is an embarrassment of riches, from traditional deep-fried kafta (spiced meatballs in a crust of ground lamb and bulgur) and baked kibbie (a fine-textured terrine of ground lamb, wheat germ and pignolis) to Rawia’s new-fangled lamb “osso bucco” and shepherd’s pie. If lamb’s not your

thing, don’t admit it to the chef (she works the dining room every night, visiting each table). Just order the fascinating fetit jaj—a complicated layered dish of toasted bread, spiced rice pilaf, tender shredded braised chicken and a tahini-yogurt sauce. Save room for sides—bracingly bitter sautéed dandelion and shulbato, cracked wheat with chickpeas and eggplant. For dessert (have dessert!—how often do you get out to Bay Ridge?) try the harissa (a semolina cake soaked in rose syrup) or the *recherché* milk pudding flavored with mastic, a resinous spice made from the sap of evergreen trees on the tiny Aegean island of Chios.

Behind the stoves, staffers (Bay Ridge locals all) hail from places where the flavors and ingredients of Palestine are familiar: Tunisia, Lebanon, Albania and Syria. But this is Rawia’s food—she has a hand in everything that leaves the kitchen. And it’s all in homage to her mother, who set the gold standard to which Tanoreen is always striving.

Rawia describes her childhood home as packed with visiting relatives from neighboring villages—“a full house, always”—with a kitchen supplied in part by a small backyard garden. “We had a big cabinet where we kept jams for the whole year, and pickled eggplant, cucumbers, olives.” Seasonal delicacies—tomatoes, green almonds, fresh figs—were prized then as they are at Tanoreen today. This spring, look for early fava beans, with shells so thin and tender they don’t need peeling. The simple way to cook them, says Rawia, is in a sauté with onion, garlic, olive and “all those ‘nice’ spices”—she won’t say what exactly, as she hopes to market her nine-ingredient Tanoreen spice mixture someday.

This summer Rawia and her daughter, Jumana, will open an expanded Tanoreen, down the street from its current quarters, seating nearly 90 guests in a Mediterranean-themed dining room. “Lots of natural wood and candles, paintings and pottery,” she says. “No heavy drapes.” The wine list (also a first for Tanoreen, which always has been BYOB) will include labels from Greece and Lebanon. The kafta and kibbie, the frekeh salad, the mhammara, those exquisite spiral cookies of golden farina and cinnamon-scented date—all of it, Rawia promises, will be the same. “I get a lot of American-born Arabs who have nostalgia for this,” she says. “They keep telling me, ‘you cook like my grandma!’ That’s a good feeling. I don’t want to lose that.” 🍷

*Tanoreen; 7704 3rd Avenue; 718.748.5600; Open Tues–Fri, noon–10:30 p.m.; Sat & Sun, 10:30 a.m.–10:30 p.m.*



